

Live Skartveit

## The Mangled and Devoured

A comparative analysis of Raw and The Neon Demon

Bacheloroppgave i Filmvitenskap

Veileder: Julia Leyda

Trondheim, november 2018



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Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet

Det humanistiske fakultet

Institutt for kunst- og medievitenskap



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## Introduction

Women on film has been debated for just about as long as film has existed. We have gone through several feminist waves since then, all of which have left their marks on film. But even as women in the real world have gotten more rights, better quality of life and more agency over their own bodies and choices, their cinematic counterparts have not all taken as great strides.

The film industry is to this day heavily dominated by men. When Greta Gerwig was nominated for best director for *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017) in 2018, she was only the fifth woman to be so in the long history of the Academy Awards. On screen, women occupied only 34% of speaking roles in the 100 top grossing films in the US in 2017 (womenandhollywood).

Even so, this seemingly slow-moving process aside, things are happening. Women are taking more space in the movies – both in blockbusters and indie-film. We are talking more than ever about diversity and equality both in front of and behind the camera. And some films are taking this to the extreme to show just what women are made of.

Whether it be portraying insanity as in *Black Swan* (Darren Aaronofsky, 2012), exacting bloody revenge on your abusers as in *Revenge* (Coralie Fargeat, 2017) or embracing your lesbianism and gender-nonconformity as in *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011), women are showing that they can do more than be looked at and admired.

And now, the time has finally come for them to show their truly vile, grotesque sides.

In this paper, I wish to look at how cannibalism and body horror is used in films about women to comment on their womanhood, sexuality and their relationships with other women.

I have elected to write a comparative analysis of *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016) and *Raw* (Julie Ducournau, 2016). Both movies have female leads, and they both deal with female cannibalism.

When men engage in cannibalism, the result is often deviance, extreme body-horror or psychopathy. As I will attempt to show, connecting womanhood and body horror often leads to an exploration of gender. The shock of such a taboo topic as cannibalism being connected to women – the “weaker sex”, is a way to make one think of womanhood in a new way.

In this paper, I will start off talking about the horror-genre in general. Then I will move on to discuss cannibalism in pop culture, women's roles in horror movies, how sex and body horror connects, and womanhood and female friendships.

### **Genre of excess, gender and horror**

Horror, as well as porn and melodrama, are categorized as “genres of excess” by film scholar Linda Williams in her text “Film Bodies. Gender, Genre, and Excess”.

This text looks at how and why we watch movies that deals with bodily functions and our bodily reactions to this. The genres all have in common their tight connection to gender – particularly women. They all portray women differently, but even so, womanhood is key. And particularly the suffering of women. While one can argue that pornography is pleasure, it is also often degradation. Where men are seldom degraded in the same way, there is a rather extensive and common theme in heterosexual porn to degrade the woman.

Melodrama as well focuses on women and traditionally “feminine” topics and emotions. You have a well of movies focusing on romantic relationships, most often tragedies. These are almost always from the woman's perspective and its main demographic is almost always women. The woman in agony is in focus – the woman suffering from loss of a loved one, from a break-up, and so on.

Traditionally, horror follows this pattern well. The woman tortured, hunted, killed, is an image familiar to most lovers of horror. In the new wave of horror-films stemming from the seventies, often exemplified by *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), the female characters are often killed in very visceral, disturbing ways onscreen. Men are also killed, but few are killed onscreen in the same manner.

However, these traditional slasher-horrors present a dilemma. On the one hand, you have the woman's tortured body, her agony and her misery which is heavily glorified and dwelled upon. She is punished for her sexual acts and is often killed post-coitus. This fact has led many feminist film theorists to label such horror as sexist and misogynist. However, Williams argues – the female character is not solely victimized and preyed upon. Often in these films you have what has been termed “the final girl”. This character is the woman who survives, who castrates the killer, who gets revenge, who saves the day. Jamie Lee Curtis's Laurie from *Halloween* is the classic example of such a character. She is resourceful, virginal, intelligent and strong. She gets the audience's empathy, and she is the character we all root for.

Few other genres have such a tradition of presenting women as the ass-kicking heroes. What do we then make of this dilemma? Here we have a male audience (for horror's main demographic is teenaged boys) rooting for and putting themselves in the shoes of a female character. All the same, they are peppered with images of murdered, mangled, disempowered women. Sexualized violence is all too common in mainstream media as well – to punish women, you rape them or prostitute them.

Neither *The Neon Demon*, nor *Raw* utilizes the trope of the final girl in the classical sense. Where both of the films center around women, they are not the type of horror that focuses on external factors, picking off one after the other. They are the type of horror that turn inwards, though to varying degrees, that look at relationships, personalities changing, evolving.

You could probably argue that the demographic of these movies are not young boys, for though they both utilize horrifying body horror as cinematic elements, they do not do so for thrills or entertainment.

Both of these films successfully embody the bodily element of the horror film, as Williams point out in her text. There is certainly excess in both, there is sex, elements that make us squirm, close our eyes and make us nauseous. The physical reaction of the viewer is very much elemental to the film's success. If they did not utilize such extreme taboos, they would not be as effective in making their motives clear. They would not be as memorable, as distinct and as shockingly fascinating to the audience.

The women in these films do not embody the traditional female gender roles for the most part. Not in the sense of the classics from the seventies (*Alien* excluded), at least. That said, there is a big difference in how the women are portrayed in the two movies, what the movies say about womanhood. Before I go further into this, I will briefly go into what cannibalism has been used to symbolize and what it currently symbolizes in mainstream media.

### **The mangled and devoured**

Cannibalism as a cultural phenomenon has been utilized in many different ways throughout the centuries. In most people the very idea of cannibalism invokes a sense of nausea and disgust, and as such this very concept has been used to antagonize and "other" groups of people for a long time.

Often, the idea of cannibalism in film makes people think of the Italian body horrors from the seventies, of tribes in the thick of Africa capturing white people and putting them in big pots.



It has been used to suggest that other cultures are primitive and rationalize colonization of Africa, but it is questionable whether these cannibalistic tribes actually exist (Brown, 2013, p. 19-20).

This way of viewing cannibalism is othering. It is taking a distinct, repulsive trait and claiming that others partake in it, thus furthering the idea that the other is inherently evil, primitive or disturbed. It is an excellent excuse to go in and “save” these primitive tribes through colonizing them.

In more recent times, however, as colonization has fallen dramatically in popularity, cannibalism has been repurposed to fit a new, modern problem. The rise of the anti-hero in popular media has created a new way of looking at ourselves in film. We want to see troubled characters, we want to see characters who are severely flawed, we want to see the dark sides of humanity, and we are no longer as unwilling to see ourselves portrayed negatively. Now, cannibalism is used to reflect upon ourselves, of what we’re scared of in individuals.

The rising individualism and the popularization of psychology over the last century makes colonization, nationalism and racial othering less interesting and less acceptable in mainstream media. We have moved away from the idea that a whole people can be summarized in so many words and are more interested in what makes a single individual that person. Cannibalism is no longer used to justify taking native people’s land, and instead is used to look at what terrify us the most about our biggest enemy – ourselves (Brown, 2013, p. 52-54).

*Female sexuality carries the same taboo as a ravenous flesh-eating teenager in this provocative feature debut from French filmmaker Julia Ducournau. (Dry, 2017)*

Interestingly enough, even though these movies are focused on individuality, they both connect the depravity of cannibalism with something that for ages has been very controversial, especially on film. If one agrees with Brown in the assertion that imagery of cannibalism coincides with what currently scares the general population, the conclusion is that female sexuality is something we as a society views as a threat.

Both *Raw* and *The Neon Demon* were met with outcries of horror and disgust. *The Neon Demon* was booed at the Cannes showing. Is it really necessary, people might ask, to show body horror onscreen? Is it simply sensationalist and shocking to attract viewers who like to be outraged?

While certain elements might be intended as shock-elements, it's my firm opinions that these traits are, whether purposefully or not, elements that tell us something about womanhood and sexuality in modern society and film.

In his review of *Raw*, Peter Bradshaw claims (2017):

*While it isn't exactly true to say that cannibalism is just a metaphor for something else, eating human flesh is appropriate for a drama about sexuality, identity, body image and conformity.*

Indeed, both films have themes of conformity, sexuality and body image. In *The Neon Demon*, the cannibalism is used as a way to absorb the lead character's attributes. Her youth, her beauty, her sexual appeal. The act of eating another human when portrayed negatively is often a "*usurpation of power by a stronger, more dominate power, cannibalism in literature is always more than eating*" (Cleary, 2018, p. 63). In these movies, it is clear who are the stronger parties – the models, shediabls, of *The Neon Demon*, and in *Raw*, it is her sister being more dominate, again, portraying her more negatively than her sister.

It should be mentioned that who actually kills Adrien at the end is ambiguous as we never actually see the murder. Justine wakes up next to him, covered in blood, while her sister is in the corner, with her face far more bloodied.

Women being both victim and victimizer in horror film is not a common trait in horror films. I will further discuss the discourse around the portrayal of women in horror film and how the films both deviate from and follow the norms of the genre.

### **Wired for self-destruction?**

Women in film history have often lacked autonomy. As Laura Mulvey pointed out in her classic article, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) a woman is seen, passive and never the active character. This has changed to a certain extent, but still one can see all too often that a story happens to the woman, not because of her, as evidenced by the lack of female speaking roles. Interestingly, Mulvey herself has later challenged this theory herself. She questions, in her 2015 book on film and feminism, whether the theory is now archaic, so far from its original time. The 70's, which was the last decade where film could only be enjoyed in the theatre, and overflowing with radical academics, are not necessarily directly translatable to the film of 2018. (Mulvey, 2015, p. 17-20).

Another critic of the theory is Cynthia A. Freeland, who asserts that the “Mulveyan schema” is simplistic. She points out that in horror, women, as often as men, have the “gaze”. That is, in thread with the “final girl”-trope, the heroine is often the first to view the monster. We see the killer through her eyes, we view as she does (Freeland, 1996, p. 629).

That said, I still want to work with the dichotomy of active/passive, male/female, as I continue to believe there is a tendency in mainstream cinema of men being the ones who furthers the plot, while women are plot devices. I also do see use of the theory of the “male gaze” with regards to sexualization of women.

Admittedly, using the male gaze as a standard for all or most of mainstream film is not correct. As I will discuss further, *Raw* subverts this, when Justine gazes at her sexual obsession, Adrien. Even so, this is a subversion, not a norm. It would not have been noticeable or mentionable if it had not stood out in the large numbers of films that objectify women in the same way. It is a way to show how extreme Justine’s growing sexual appetite is becoming. There are many opinions about the woman’s role in horror film, and it cannot simply boil down to men viewing and killing women.

That said, one cannot ignore the power structure between women and men in horror. Women are seldom the killer, and usually the victim. With a few notable exceptions, killers in films are almost always male characters who have some sort of difficult relationship to women. Whether it’s Oedipal like in *Psycho*’s Norman Bates (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) or transsexualism, as in *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), male killers disturbed mentality is often a direct result of their relationship with women and womanhood. That is not to imply that transgender women are really men, but in this particular film the killer is portrayed as a woman-obsessed man. Interestingly, the literal cannibal in this film, Hannibal Lecter, is one of the most sympathetic characters in the film. Although the main female character is a driven, interesting, active woman, she over time gets very much guided, controlled, and steered by Hannibal.

The sympathy we feel for Hannibal is not coincidental. Based on Murray Smith’s sympathy structure, we feel allegiance with him. This, in part, is due to his being one of the very few men in the movie who treats Clarice, the main character, with respect. We have a sort of perverse allegiance - we like him in part because he is so twisted (Smith, 1999, p. 218-223). His having sympathetic traits as well is important for our liking him however – it’s harder to like characters who are solely cruel and evil.

As such, it's a lot easier in *Raw* to have sympathy with Justine than with her sister. Justine battles against her evil urges – and almost succumbs. Still, we have allegiance with her – we follow her more, we see her struggling. Her sister only appears to mess things up for her. She's the one who sets off Justine's cannibalistic tendencies. She's the one who humiliates her in front of the whole school, and who is complicit in the death of her only friend. It's easy to see then, why we have more sympathy for the flesh-eating Justine than her equally dangerous sister, unscrupulous and seemingly devoid of empathy.

Horror has, as mentioned, laid special emphasis on female innocence. In films that utilize the “final girl”-trope, a trope first articulated by Carol Clover, the woman who survives is often the virginal, pure woman. She is not vapid and slutty like the other girls who are all killed onscreen. Of course, as neither *The Neon Demon* nor *Raw* are slashers, they do not fit this trope to the tee. They do, however, draw on the same set of innocence/degeneracy as the old slashers, and entangled in sex, it becomes clear that there's a steady progression from saint to slut in both characters.

Both *The Neon Demon* and *Raw*'s main, female characters start out as innocent women. Virginal, blue-eyed, naïve and shocked by the deranged world that meets them. However, they are both soon sucked into the vortex of the shallow, sexualized world outside their safe bubbles.

Justine appears at the start steadfast in her beliefs, in her vegetarianism, in her moral superiority. She is only introduced to meat by her seemingly morally depraved sister, who throughout the film teases her into becoming more outrageously sexual and boundary-pushing. The film is more or less an analogy for Justine's sexual awakening. She starts the film as a virgin, but soon finds that her growing libido thrusts her into desperately sexual escapades. Her cannibalistic tendencies come out the closer she gets to sexual ecstasy – at one point, she bites a man she makes out with at a party to blood. She bites herself to blood during sex with Adrien. It is clear that the hornier she gets, the bloodier it gets. This immediately connects her sexuality to immorality, to depravity.

What's interesting is that, ultimately, she is not the one who is punished – at least not physically – by her growing sexual interest. Instead, it is her gay roommate who gets trapped by her desire. As such, the rise of female sexuality does not actively harm the woman in question. She is strengthened in her growing need for sex. The men around her, however, are

not so lucky. The slaughter of men in horror is not as common as it is with women, but it is not unheard of. Clover states that:

*The numbers are not equal, and the scenes are not equally charged, but the fact remains that in most slasher films after 1978 (following Halloween), men and boys who go after “wrong” sex also die. (Clover, p. 34, 1992)*

After the sexual act, Adrien refuses the straight woman’s continued advances and continues to go after homosexual sex – historically thought of as “wrong” sex. Is it a coincidence?

In Jesse’s case, however, she does not get to decide what she wants sexually, as Justine does. She is not the active teller of her story, and things happen to her, not because of her.

She also starts out as a doe-eyed, young girl trying to make it in the world. She is youthful, pretty, and has no idea what she’s getting herself into. Helped to where she’s gotten by a man she’s met online, she soon gets drawn into a world full of evil models and sexual predators.

She becomes hardened over time. She realizes just how much her beauty is worth. She can get what she wants simply because she is young and beautiful, and everyone hates her for it. This, she is well aware of, and she loves the attention. She gets job after job, right under the noses of the veteran models who envy her.

This inevitably leads to her downfall.

As she grows more and more confident and secure in her place, she starts receiving uncomfortable, sexual advances. Her landlord, played by Keanu Reeves, attempts to rape her. She escapes to her only friend, Ruby, who agrees to let her stay with her. Of course, Ruby is not being kind for kind’s sake, as she soon makes sexual advances towards Jesse. When Jesse rebuffs these, she also attempts to rape her. Jesse escapes, barely.

When no one gets what they want from her, the women band together to take her down. They eat her physically and metaphorically to get her youth and beauty. As the models wash the blood off themselves in a sensual shower-scene, Ruby instead elects to bathe in her blood, watching the two women lustily.

Both *Raw* and *The Neon Demon* portrays the female sexuality as dangerous, devouring. Tania Modleski poses in her article “The Terror of Pleasure”, that mass culture, which I take to include the beauty industry, is terrifying because it feminizes the audience. Through use of feminine imagery, it “rapes” the audience (p. 625, 1986). At one point in *The Neon Demon*,

the camera slowly moves up towards a female body lying down, legs first. Slowly, a watery substance starts flowing from her vagina, but the redness soon appears, and we realize it's blood. This very clear imagery presents the exact same tendency – female anatomy terrorizes and horrifies.

Later on, both Ruby and Adrien's sexualities play big parts in the sexual downfall (or rise, depending on who one sees it) of their heroines. Adrien as Justine's primary sexual interest, and Ruby as the one who desires Jesse. I will now look at how homosexuality is portrayed in these movies.

### **Sex and the eaten**

The two most memorable scenes from both *Raw* and *The Neon Demon* involve sex, death and homosexuality.

In *Raw*, the main character Justine has sex with her gay, best friend, and in sexual frenzy she takes a solid bite out of herself. In the last scene, she and/or her equally cannibalistic sister, appear to have killed and eaten him after sex. *The Neon Demon*'s sex scene is of a different, but equally disturbing, nature. In it, the Jena Malone's character Ruby masturbates to the corpse of someone who looks like her female crush (or, more succinctly, obsession), someone she has not long ago attempted to rape.

It is fair to say that both scenes are disturbing, shocking and taboo. They are also fairly unique in terms of showing female sexuality – on top, in power, in ecstasy. Both of these scenes can be argued as feminist, empowering moves, however grotesque they may be. I, however, would like to argue that beneath these women on top are age-old tropes pertaining to the degeneracy of homosexuality, both showing victimization and predatorial behavior.

The opinions about said scenes are many and varied. To take possibly the more shocking of the two, let's start with lesbian necrophilia.

Tim Robey says in his review of the film (2016):

*Justifications for the scene aren't unimaginable. It's hardly any more depraved than the 20 minutes or so of blood-drenched screen time that follows. But the depravity is more specifically sexual – the need of Ruby's character more on open, pornographic display. Why is she the one who forsakes every other appetite the film is selling – for the young, the beautiful, the unsullied – in favour of rotting flesh?*

To contrast, feminist Elisa Catrina counters (2016):

*Because horror is an elevated genre, I don't view this scene as just "woman assaults dead body." It is that, for sure. But it's also a scene about a woman unapologetically experiencing a kind of pleasure the viewer finds disgusting. Ruby's pleasure is not for us to consume: we can't see her naked body, and every time we do see her it's in relation to a corpse, dampening our secondhand desire.*

Notable in Catrina's review is the fact that this woman, Ruby, is a lesbian is mentioned only off-handedly. The fact that her object of lust is female is not relevant, and Ruby is woman first, lesbian second. Catrina's point certainly has some merit. One cannot write a feminist film-analysis without mentioning Laura Mulvey's concept of the *male gaze*, which strikes me as being Catrina's main point here. And it is true that Ruby's sexual escapades here is portrayed without the lingering shot of her body. She is never sexualized, she is not for heterosexual male viewers to look at and find pleasure in. Particularly the fact that a lesbian sex scene is so vulgar, so unsexy, so grotesque, is quite an unusual turn from the common lesbian sex that is performed for men.

Even so, there is one thing Catrina fails to mention, which brings her argument to a screeching halt.

As Robey mentioned, why is *Ruby* the only character with a sexual motive? The fact that all characters in this movie wants something from Jesse is clear. The photographers want her face for fame. The other models want her beauty and youth. Ruby wants her body.

It is a mistake not to view this scene in the light of media's general tendency of lesbian characterization. Lesbian predators abound, whether it's in the shape of teachers who seduce their students, or lesbians who obsess over their targets to the point of stalking and even killing. *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) and *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994) springs to mind. And here is Ruby, the only character in the movie who preys sexually on Jesse. You could argue Keanu Reeves's character is a sexual predator as well, which he definitely is, but his raping a child is never seen, never dwelled on.

Of course, Ruby's desire and grotesqueness is interesting from a feminist perspective but is not as uncommon throughout film history as one might be led to believe. While necrophilia is a very unusual aspect in a relatively mainstream film, in this context, it serves as an element of shock, of disgust. It is a scene that does not further the plot, it is a lull in the action, to make

us truly squirm in our seats. It is, while perhaps shocking to the casual viewer, not a new concept to link madness, disgust and lesbianism.

Take *Black Swan*, full of body horror, madness, intense female relationships – and lesbianism. The film contains a scene where Natalie Portman's character has sex with Mila Kunis's character. It's not just a shocking scene – it's fully imaginary. Portman's character develops a psychotic break and envisions herself being eaten out by Kunis.

Or, less graphically so, *Lost and Delirious* (Léa Pool, 2001), with Piper Perabo playing a lesbian who gets dumped. The girlfriend then goes on to find a male partner, and Perabo's character gets more and more obsessive, insane, for lack of a more precise word, and throws herself off a roof-top.

The examples are many. And naturally, it is not so that writing horrific, disgusting, deranged female characters is decidedly anti-feminist, nor is it necessarily bad writing. It is, however, quite telling that all heterosexual characters in this movie are spared the degradation of having sex with rotting flesh.

*Raw*, on the other hand, flips this dynamic on the head. That's not to say that the main character, Justine, is not on top, in charge, in lust. She very much is.

Here, the situation goes as follows: the two best friends go back to their shared room after a party, drunk. They end up fooling around, despite the man being gay, and winds up having sex.

Where in *The Neon Demon*, the sex scene was meant to degrade both Ruby and Jesse, in *Raw*, the sex is empowering, engaging.

For Justine, that is. For what, exactly is the importance of her partner's sexuality? If it was of no importance, the man could simply be straight. Adrien reacts negatively afterwards, and gets angry with Justine, saying he has spent 20 years in the closet, and does not want to sleep with women. She has, essentially, stripped a man of his sexuality.

While most women are sexual victims, Justine is the opposite. She conquers the only man who should be unconquerable. She fucks the unfuckable. In topping Adrien, she not only fucks him, she steals from him, the most potent trait of the modern man – his sexuality. She violently takes what has been used to harm women for eternity. Not only does she beat the oppressor (in this case the image of men), she strips him entirely of his identity by not allowing him his sexuality.



This is a very fascinating scene in the movie, and one that, unlike in *The Neon Demon*, furthers the plot as well as being shockingly grotesque. It furthers the plot of Justine's growth, her journey to womanhood. But as much as it is fascinating, it is not solely an empowering, feminist move to have the main character, a straight woman, assault a homosexual man.

As lesbians through film history have been active participants in their stories, they have in a way been masculinized. Where we envision the stereotypical man being the predator and the stereotypical woman being the prey, lesbian relationships often get portrayed the same way. (Hollinger, 2015, p. 131) The stronger, more masculine woman ends up obsessing, killing, mutilating, while the more feminine, passive woman gets victimized. One can argue that this is another way of demonizing lesbianism, of explaining its deviance – even in movies that are aimed at lesbian viewers, such as the teacher/student type film.

In the same way, and possibly on a larger scale, homosexual men have been feminized. They are no longer the predators, they are the victims. They get gay-bashed, raped, they die from AIDS, they are weak. Feminine. The ultimate insult to men – womanly. There are exceptions to this rule, naturally, and in horror dating from the 90's and earlier, sexual deviance was a common trait in male killers. Homosexuality, transsexualism, incestual relationships and feelings were relatively common denominators. However, as society progressed with regards to gay rights, they started portraying the sorrows and hardships gay men faced – almost exclusively.

In *Raw*, Adrien is never portrayed as a weak personality. He is confident, cool, he exudes sexuality. But his sexuality, which is so clearly important to him, is taken away in his last moment of life. He gets robbed of what's his, and he is weakened, feminized, victimized, for the benefit of the straight female character's growth, her sexual prowess.

While not a condemnation of the scene nor the movie, it is worth noting that however progressive it seems on first view, however subversive, it plays into old tropes. Where Ruby is active, masculine, predator, Adrien gets feminized, weakened, preyed upon. Decades of degrading the queer character emerges.

And notably, while the necrophiliac sex scene gets painstakingly analyzed, little is said of Justine's devouring of queer men.

### **Best friends forever**

The two memorable sex scenes in the movies very distinctly shows the difference in motives between each film. *Raw* arguably centers on the main character, spends most time with her and builds her journey up to be a personal story of growth through horrendous means.

*The Neon Demon*, however, functions more as a sort of cautionary tale, of Sodom and Gomorra, the rise and fall of a young, innocent girl. It aims to criticize an industry rather than focus on the personal growth of the main character.

It would as such be a mistake to compare the two on how well it portrays realistic characters, as the motives of both are so very different despite the approaches being somewhat similar.

That said, the two films use the shock effect of cannibalism very differently.

As I have pointed out, the most shocking scene in *The Neon Demon*, is likely the necrophiliac sex scene. The actual cannibalism shown in the movie is surprisingly sparse. There is licking of blood, eating a finger, and the final scene which involves an eye ball being regurgitated. Jesse's eyeball. The final scene is arguably one of the most visceral, brutal scenes in the movie. One of the models, out on a shoot, starts gagging. The eyeball comes out, and she says, to her friend, "I need to get her out of me". She proceeds to stab herself in the stomach, and the other friend eats the eyeball. She returns to set, another model replaces the first, and the show goes on. Even so, the scene is relatively light on the gore-factor. There is no such ravenous hunger, no utter disgust in the face of beautiful woman popping an eyeball in her mouth.

The actual devouring of Jesse by her model friends is, oddly enough, never shown onscreen. The viewer is treated to the view of a bloody pool, and the indication that true horror is going on. We are then shown the aftermath – model friends are showering the blood off their bodies, Ruby in a bathtub, eyes fixed on the two women showering together. Ruby is again masculinized, she is the active viewer, watching the heterosexual women being sexy in a shower.

On one hand, it is freeing to watch a woman watching. To see her seeing, rather than being seen, observed rather than being observed. Again, a reversal of the male gaze. But rather than empowering, it feels yet again like I am being told that lesbians are not truly women. Lesbians are predators, separated from their gender by their unnatural desires. A lesbian in the place of a man. Straight women allowed to still be women.

One cannot help but wonder why the film makes such an intentional attempt at criticizing an industry by focusing on women's behavior towards each other. The women are from the first scene pitted against each other. They fight for beauty, for self-worth. The only woman who seems sympathetic only wants to manipulate the main character into sleeping with her.

The main character herself becomes devoured both literally and figuratively by this world. She goes in, blue-eyed and innocent, and exits bloodied, vapid, empty and ruined by the harsh realities of the fashion industry, where all that matters is youth and beauty. Jesse says it herself: "I can make money off pretty". But also, as she progresses into darkness – "My mother used to call me a dangerous girl. She was right. I am dangerous."

In a scathing review, Kayleigh Hughes remarks that *The Neon Demon* plays into the trope that women are best left modest. That they, by celebrating beauty, especially their own, "(are) both a threat to men and an invitation." (Hughes, 2016). Their womanhood, should they choose to divulge in it, is ultimately the biggest threat.

And woman is woman's worst enemy.

Justine also struggles with her female relationships. She can only befriend men at her new school, and her sister is no better. Seemingly with a thorn in the side for Justine, she pushes her into madness. The inciting incident happens early on, as Justine who hails from a family of vegetarian, is bullied by her sister into eating raw meat during her fresher's week. This is what sets her blood lust going, and she now finds she has an insatiable need for meat. She undergoes a troubling journey and is horrified by her new appetite. But at the same time, she finds she is able to bond more with her sister. From an uptight good girl, she loosens up, she becomes stronger, though more desperate and deranged.

The film ends as she wakes up next to her best friend's half eaten body, which her sister gets imprisoned for. This sisterhood is interesting, because on one hand, it's something Justine yearns for. She wants to be friends with her cool, older sister, and she needs her to get out of her shell. In the end, only the two understand each other, only they know what they're going through and it's them against the world. On the other hand, this is the downfall of Justine. Her sister's bad influence leads her on a path to self-destruction. It's them against the world, but it wouldn't necessarily have to be that way if her sister had not been so set on Justine becoming cooler, more outgoing, more outrageous.

The films both end up vilifying strong, female bonds. *The Neon Demon* presents women as preying on each other, as being bitter enemies solely by being women occupying the same space. *Raw* is a little subtler, a little more complex, but ultimately ends up portraying female relationships as bad influence. Warping a young, innocent girl into becoming, essentially, a deviant. The relationship is fraught with conflict. The sister ingratiates herself in Justine's life, only to humiliate her in front of the whole school. When they make up again, the sister betrays her again, winding up in prison. Still, Justine shows empathy and love for her sister in the penultimate scene. Bad influence, yes, but sisterly love even so.

Yet again, if one follows Brown's assessment that cannibalism portrays what our society is most afraid of, it becomes clear through these films that female relationships – and their sexualities - are to be wary of.

### **Conclusion**

As I have delved into *Raw* and *The Neon Demon* on the topic of cannibalism, I have come to find that the films are both as much preoccupied with sex as they are with body horror. This combination of the grotesque and the sexual goes to show that sexuality, and particularly women's, is something to fear.

The women start off innocent and unprepared for what they meet in the real world. For *The Neon Demon*'s Jesse, that means the brutality of the fashion industry. For *Raw*'s Justine, an inherent cannibalistic desire comes out in the face of the debauchery of university students. A journey for both, from innocence to depravity, but the consequences are of different form.

Jesse's newfound confidence, her cold arrogance, becomes the death of her. She takes on more than she can chew and ends up as a pool full of blood. Her death is at the hands of her coworkers and enemies, the other models, as well as the dangerous lesbian Ruby.

Justine goes a different direction. While her interactions with women also leads her down the wrong path, she ends up stronger for it. She has gone through hell, but fought it, and become the better person.

The films both vilify and praise female sexuality. Justine's descent into cannibalism occurs simultaneously as her growing desire for sex. She seeks out men, she sleeps with her gay best friend, and her confidence grows. This, as I have shown, puts her in the place of control, while also leading her to become more and more dangerous. She experiences sexual control by having sex with her gay friend, and ultimately, by his death at her and her sister's hands.

In *The Neon Demon*, a woman also experiences sexual control. Ruby, having sex with a corpse, is seen getting sexual pleasure on her own terms, rather than the audience's. However, as I have pointed out, both of these depictions of homosexuality lead to villainizing lesbians and victimizing gay men. This follows a long trend in mainstream cinema, in which the roles for homosexual women and men are swapped, possibly to assert that lesbians are not real women, and gay men are not real men.

Finally, cannibalism, according to Brown, has throughout its history been used to vilify that which we don't understand or like as a society. While back in the days it was other nations and tribes, today, it is turned against us and our psyches.

In the case of these movies, I would like to propose that it's suggested that one of our current society's biggest fears is the autonomy of women and their sexuality. The women regress as they discover their sexualities, become too self-assured and conceited. In one case, it empowers though leads directly to catastrophe, and in the other, it leads to the main character's gruesome death.

Either way, female sexuality is clearly an issue today, as it was during the Hay's code, the feminism of the 70's, and the postmodernism that came later.

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### **Film list**

*Black Swan* (Darren Aaronofsky, 2012)

*Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978)

*Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994)

*Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017)

*Lost and Delirious* (Léa Pool, 2001)

*Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001)

*The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016)

*Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011)

*Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)

*Raw* (Julie Ducournau, 2016)

*Revenge* (Coralie Fargeat, 2017)

*Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991)



